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Second language acquisition and the language tourism experience

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Abstract

There is a general consensus that study abroad fosters the development of communicative competence in a foreign language. This is the principle underlying the promotion of international mobility in academic environments and the growing demand for language learning courses in a foreign country. However, language travel as a typology of educational tourism has drawn relatively little scholarly attention. This paper focuses on language tourism as a holistic activity providing meaningful learning experiences in and beyond academic contexts, a phenomenon which needs to be analysed from the two complementary perspectives of supply and demand considering the determining factors, components and impacts.

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Keywords: Language tourism; study abroad; second language acquisition; language travel market

1. Introduction

According to Marca España, in 2012 language tourism as a source of income for Spain exceeded €2,000 million, a growth of 28% compared to 2011. For the vast majority of the visitors who travel to Spain to learn Spanish their language learning requirements go beyond purely linguistic concerns: they look for full study experiences abroad.

Language travel is a healthy sector, a sound service industry involving a wide range of stakeholders, from language learning providers to travel principals. In the past, the main focus of an overseas language trip package used to be on language learning. Accommodation, pick-up service, insurance, weekend excursions and extra activities were not the core of the business for travel advisors. Nowadays customers are more demanding and have

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higher expectations regarding other components of the package they buy, as they are better informed and wish to make guaranteed, optimised investments (Smith, 2011).

Since study abroad (SA) sojourners use several tourist services and engage not only in language learning tasks but also in tourist activities, they can be therefore considered language tourists as well as language learners. This exploratory paper will be looking at this duality from an integrated perspective.

2. Language outcomes of SA

Global reviews of second language acquisition (SLA) studies conducted since the 1960s on the linguistic advantages of SA programmes have reached a number of general conclusions. To start with, language gains have been reported at all proficiency levels, although to different extents (Freed, 1998). Lower-level learners seem to be in a better position to benefit from the SA experience (Brecht et al., 1995; Churchill & DuFon, 2006), while more advanced students may take more advantage of interaction opportunities with members of the local community. However, the latter show fewer gains apparently, perhaps because of their own perceptions concerning the difficulties of using higher order skills to move up the scale which at best just enable them to approach native-like norms. To this respect, some researchers have claimed that the ceiling effect of the tests used to measure language development might contribute to this perceived constraint (Brecht, et al., 1995; Freed, 1998).

With respect to the language-related outcomes of SA, Kinginger (2013) concludes that the SA experience can potentially enable learners to develop their communicative competence in every domain, albeit sometimes to a modest degree. In particular, learners' oral skills and abilities for meaningful social interaction in a second language (L2), which cannot be promoted in the same way by means of formal instruction at home, can be boosted. Thus, they "broaden their repertoire of speech acts, become more aware of register and style, develop greater autonomy as conversationalists, and incorporate fluency-enhancing formulaic language into their speech" (Kinginger, 2013, p. 4).

Current research also focuses on how learners' attitudes towards the host communities can either facilitate or restrict social interaction, as well as the relevance of some SA programme features such as course length, leisure options, and housing and classroom arrangements (Churchill & Dufon, 2006). The success of the language learning experience abroad can definitely be determined by these and other ingredients, which turn the learners' educational pursuit into a full language tourism activity.

3. Language tourism

Language tourism may be defined as "a tourist activity undertaken by those travellers (or educational tourists) taking a trip which includes at least an overnight stay in a destination outside their usual place of residence for less than a year and for whom language learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip" (Iglesias, 2014, p. 10).

The conceptualisation of language tourism presented in this article is based on Ritchie's model of the educational tourism market system (Ritchie et al., 2003, p.15) and adapted to the idiosyncratic features of this specific niche. The working model presented in this paper aims at putting a spotlight on the main ingredients that make up the language tourism experience concerning both the demand and the supply. Table 1 sums up the aspects related to the consumer -i.e. the demand-, whereas Table 2 shows the product-related factors -i.e. the supply.

Table 1. Language tourism market system: demand.

Demand: the language tourist	
1. Demographics	1.1. Age 1.2. Gender 1.3. Education 1.4. Occupation 1.5. Origins 1.6. Travel party

2.Travel behaviour	2.1. Past experiences 2.2. Planning 2.3. Length of stay 2.4. Period of stay 2.5. Travel patterns
3. Motivations	3.1. Intrinsic 3.2. Extrinsic 3.3. Amotivation
4. Perceptions	4.1. Recommendations 4.2. Preferences 4.3. Expectations 4.4. Satisfaction

Table 2. Language tourism market system: supply.

Supply: the language tourism product		
1. Product composition	1.1. Language learning component	1.1.1. Educational input 1.1.2. Language learning complements
	1.2. Travel component	1.2.1. Transport 1.2.2. Accommodation 1.2.3. Catering 1.2.4. Leisure
2. Marketing & management structures	2.1. Language education providers 2.2. Public administration institutions 2.3. Trade bodies 2.4. Travel planners	
3. Destination's environmental & social resource base	3.1. Local culture 3.2. Host community 3.3. Geographical context 3.4. Current situation (political, economic, social, technological, environmental & legal factors)	

Let us draw our attention to the first component of the demand: the demographics. Table 3 shows a fine-grained taxonomy of such aspects.

Table 3. Demand: demographics.

The language tourist: demographics		
1. Age	1.1. Junior	1.1.1. Pre-teens 1.1.2. Teens

	1.2. Adult	1.2.1. Young 1.2.2. Middle-aged 1.2.3. Senior		
2. Gender	2.1. Male 2.2. Female			
3. Education	3.1. Formal education system	3.1.1. Primary education 3.1.2. Secondary education 3.1.3. Higher education		
	3.2. Informal education	3.2.1. In-company training 3.2.2. Life-long learning		
4. Occupation	4.1. Student			
	4.2. Professional	4.2.1. Professional activity	4.2.1.1. Active 4.2.1.2. Not active	
		4.2.2. Position	4.2.2.1. Employee	4.2.2.1.1. Top management 4.2.2.1.2. Middle management 4.2.2.1.3. Basic operations
			4.2.2.2. Not employee	4.2.2.2.1. Employer 4.2.2.2.2. Self-employed
5. Origins	5.1. Purchasing power	5.1.1. High 5.1.2. Average 5.1.3. Low		
	5.2. Geographical provenance	5.2.1. First world 5.2.2. Developing country		
	5.3. Linguistic identity	5.3.1. Linguistic background	5.3.1.1. Monolingual 5.3.1.2. Multilingual	
		5.3.2. Closeness of first language (L1) to target language (TL)	5.3.2.1. TL similar to L1 5.3.2.2. TL not part of the same language family	
		5.3.3. Previous knowledge of TL	5.3.3.1. Total lack of previous knowledge	

			5.3.3.2. Prior proficiency level (CEFR)†	5.3.3.2.1. Advanced 5.3.3.2.2. Intermediate 5.3.3.2.3. Elementary
		5.3.4. Aptitude for L2 learning	5.3.4.1. High 5.3.4.2. Average 5.3.4.3. Low	
		5.3.5. Personality traits influencing L2 learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1991)	5.3.5.1. Self-esteem 5.3.5.2. Extroversion 5.3.5.3. Reaction to anxiety 5.3.5.4. Risk-taking 5.3.5.5. Sensitivity to rejection 5.3.5.6. Empathy 5..3.5.7. Inhibition 5.3.5.8. Tolerance of ambiguity	
	6.1. Individual			
6. Travel party	6.2. Group	6.2.1. Class 6.2.2. Friends 6.2.3. Family		

4. The language tourist's profile

According to Lightbrown and Spada (1993), the correlation between a learner's **age** and successful SLA has been quite controversial. Even though adult learners may proficiently develop their communicative competence in L2, it is very difficult for them to achieve native-like levels in terms of grammar, word choice and accent. This is not the case with young language learners, and the suggested reason for that has been the existence of a critical period for SLA before the age of 15 -and especially before the age of 10-, after which maturational constraints would come to play, as in L1 acquisition. However, this hypothesis has been challenged, since some older learners have proved to be more efficient than younger learners, at least in the early SLA stages. Moreover, SLA starting in early adolescence has sometimes been reported to be as successful eventually as acquiring a L2 at primary school. It has been argued that the age factor is closely linked to other variables, such as motivation, social identity, personality and aptitude, as well as to the learning context.

All in all, it seems that if the objective is native-like proficiency of a L2 it is more convenient to be completely immersed in the TL as early as possible, whereas "when the goal is basic communicative ability for all students in a school setting, and when it is assumed that the child's native language will remain the primary language, it may be more efficient to begin second language teaching later" (Lightbrown & Spada, 1993, p.50), bearing in mind that one or two hours a week of formal instruction will not produce very advanced L2 speakers. Parents are nowadays very concerned with providing their children with the best educational advantages they can afford, and this is one of the reasons why the average age of participants in SA programmes is lowering (Smith, 2011). The junior market, including pre-teens (between the ages of 6 and 13/14) and teens (between 13/14 and 18), is growing steadily. This segment mainly focuses on summer courses in destinations which are relatively close to the young learners' home country.

† Common European Framework of Reference

Gender is another feature that can determine SLA in some specific cultures (Siegal, 1995; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Isabelli-García, 2006), particularly for female SA sojourners, who sometimes might find it harder to benefit from interactions with the local community. Gender can be a pre-requisite for taking part in an au-pair programme with a language learning component.

The language travellers' educational background can also be significant in shaping the language tourism experience, whether it is related with formal education -e.g. a cultural exchange with a foreign high school, an international mobility programme at university level, etc.- or it is not integrated in the educational system. Within the broad category of **education,** primary education refers to elementary schooling, secondary education includes technical and vocational education, and the third level comprises higher education at college and university -including graduate, postgraduate and PhD programmes-, as well as technical and vocational education beyond the high school level.

Generally speaking, the popularity of overseas academic study -particularly in higher education- has increased. In Europe the Erasmus and Leonardo da Vinci exchange programmes and the creation of the European Higher Education Area have fostered the circulation of students with academic L2 needs. Consequently, the demand for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) preparation courses abroad addressed to students who need to fulfil access requirements in English-speaking universities is now higher. Pathway programmes leading to vocational or higher education with a view on further study or even permanent residency in Australia or the UK are more in demand, too (Smith, 2011).

On the other hand, since English is a must in career development, business IELTS preparation programmes are more popular than in the past. There is also a proliferation of complementary language courses abroad aiming at fostering key competences for life-long learning - in particular, communication in foreign languages. In addition, more employees now undertake in-company training overseas or receive sponsorship for their studies abroad from their employers, as this is considered a worthy investment (Smith, 2011).

Occupation is, therefore, an important element to consider. The individuals' jobs and positions can determine their needs and financing for their SA stays. For example, those professionals who are temporarily unemployed might be willing to pursue education and training in a foreign country, but they might also have limited affordability. Similarly, despite having more availability to travel, the self-employed may have to rely on self-financing.

In terms of **origins**, the language tourists' purchasing power can obviously be seen as a facilitator or an obstacle leading to the application for scholarships or grants. In countries like Saudi Arabia or Spain students used to receive full or partial funding for their overseas language programmes -in Spain financial support to learn English derived from the Ministry of Education and the local administrations. Currently more and more language students look for programmes that include paid work options in a foreign country, not only to have an additional source of income, but rather to gain international experience and become more competitive.

The language tourists' provenance might also be seen as a difficulty not only in economic terms, but also with respect to legal requirements. Government policies concerning restrictive visa requirements affect some destinations such as Ireland. The choice of a language tourism destination actually depends on factors like visa constraints and currency fluctuations (Smith, 2011).

As for linguistic identity, higher aptitude in L2 is considered to foster SLA. Degrees of aptitude vary for each individual and can be therefore measured through tests or inferred from performance, as it cannot be directly observed (Robinson, 2012). Whereas aptitude is not necessarily innate, personality traits are inherent to the individuals and also seem to facilitate SLA provided that they are moderate rather than extreme (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Nevertheless, the personality factors listed in Larsen-Freeman (1991) are mostly related to states, so global measurements are not valid predictors of learners' performance in a given situation.

The last category in Table 3, **travel party**, must also be regarded as a variable influencing the language travel experience. Travelling to another country with the whole class in a school trip to practice a foreign language will probably not provide the same opportunities for socializing meaningfully with the local community as travelling with a group of friends, or better yet, individually. Likewise, one-to-one tuition for individuals will probably have different impacts on the language tourism experience from group instruction. At present, family packages and packs offering accommodation plus language learning in a private foreign language teacher's home are becoming increasingly popular.

5. Final considerations

The categorisation of the demographic aspects related to the demand caters for a wide range of language tourism experiences. It transcends boundaries on the basis of universal simplicity, for example in terms of transversal formal education systems. One limitation of this approach is the fact that some categories are obvious -e.g. age- or vague -e.g. purchasing power or geographical provenance. To avoid overgeneralization this framework needs to be adjusted to each specific context.

The categories on Table 3 have been chosen for the sake of practicality and transferability. Of course, some features allow for more detailed cataloguing -e.g. students could be classified in many different ways, active professionals could work part-time or full-time, not active professionals could be in-between jobs, retired, on a leave, etc. In addition, other classifications may be possible sometimes, for instance when it comes to aptitudes -levels vs. measurement criteria-, grouping -relationship vs. size-, and prior proficiency level -Common European Framework of Reference levels vs. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or IELTS band scores.

On the other hand, as categories are interrelated, sometimes the limits are blurred and overlap, e.g. a student can be a part-time employee simultaneously, higher education programmes can be complemented by in-company training through internships, a language course can be integrated in the formal education system or be considered life-long learning facilitated by a private language school, etc.. This can be regarded as an opportunity for hybrid classifications enabling a more precise profile of language tourism users.

The working model of the language tourism market system outlined in this paper needs to be further developed. In the meantime, this framework can be used as a starting point to analyse language travel profiling and behaviour, and to examine the factors that influence the language tourism experience, their interrelations and the impacts they produce at different levels. The approaches and lines of research deriving from this model are numerous and will be gradually structured in the future.

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